

Crowd packs hearing for sanctuary bill

Community divided on designation proposal

By Fatimah Waseem fwaseem@baltsun.com



STAFF PHOTO BY FATIMAH WASEEM Opponents of a bill that would label Howard County as a "sanctuary" brought signs to the crowded public hearing Jan. 17.

A microcosm of the national immigration debate flared in Howard County's packed government chambers Tuesday night as more than 500 community members staked a divided stand on a bill that would label Howard County as a "sanctuary" for undocumented immigrants.

Although the bill does little to change local law enforcement's current relationship with undocumented immigrants, the bill drew a divided public Tuesday night.

The debate veered between two extremes: opponents said the bill invites undocumented people to Howard County at the expense of possibly stripping federal funding, while supporters said the bill was a principled stand on behalf of undocumented immigrants in a county that champions and celebrated diversity.

Opponents, clad in red, held large, printed signs that read, "No CB-9" and "diversity yes, illegal no" while supporters held flimsy 8 x 11-inch sheets that read, "Yes." Pamphlets sponsored by the local Republican committee that read "Weinstein: oath of office or law breaker" lay on distant desks in the building.

President-elect Donald Trump has vowed to strip the roughly 300 sanctuary jurisdictions around the country of federal funding — a fear raised throughout the hearing as County Council Chairman Jon Weinstein raised concerns about frequent interruptions and laughter during the hearing.

"I don't know we're demonstrating how really good we can be as a community," Weinstein said.

More than 300 people packed the building's main hearing room as around 120 people waited outside to give testimony. One overflow room was at the brim as residents shouted "yes" and "no" in a passionate show of opinion 20 minutes before the hearing began.

Proposed by council members Calvin Ball and Jen Terrasa, both Democrats, in response to the Trump presidency, the bill formally states county employees, including police, will not voluntarily participate in the enforcement of federal immigration law, but does not change the ability of police to investigate violators of criminal law. Federal and state law would also preempt the local designation.

"Do we really want MS-13 gangs setting up shop in Howard County, like they have in other sanctuary counties?" said Del. Warren Miller, a Republican.

Howard County Police Chief Gary Gardner opposes the legislation, which he said compromises the strong partnerships his department has with federal law enforcement, citing that the county's crackdown on the MS-13 gang from Central America relied on those relationships.

"We treat everyone the same regardless of their status," Gardner said.

Ball pressed Gardner for specific examples of how law enforcement's current agreements and relationships would be impacted.

Councilman Greg Fox, the only Republican on the council, reminded proponents of the designation that opponents were not against immigrants — only undocumented immigrants.

Members of the Asian community took a strong position against the bill as well, which some said threatens the safety and security of immigrants who arrived in the country legally

As of Tuesday evening, around 200 people had signed up to testify about the bill. The community's sentiment was split with 95 testifying in support and 79 opposed. The remaining were undecided.

Howard County Executive Allan Kittleman pledged to veto the measure if it crosses his desk, citing the bill as political grandstanding that threatens critical federal funding and provides a false sense of security to undocumented residents.

Earlier Tuesday evening, representatives from the faith community who are part of People Acting Together for Howard pressed Kittleman to champion diversity by posing an alternative proposal that would support undocumented residents.

"So what should be done with the thousands of undocumented immigrants living as our neighbors, attending our schools, worshiping side by side with us? Should we turn a blind eye to them, and pretend that they do not exist?" said the Rev. Paige Getty.

In personal testimony, Hector Garcia, executive director of Foreign Born Information and Referral Network, a nonprofit organization that works with immigrants and refugees, spoke on behalf of undocumented immigrants and others who are living in fear of a Trump presidency, and urged both sides to listen openly to each other, adding that his organization applauds the work of the county and local law enforcement.

"Unfortunately, many of those who FIRN serves are afraid to be here tonight and have their voices heard," Garcia said. "That is why the 'sanctuary' legislation is so important to them. The concept of a 'sanctuary' has been part of history for thousands of years.

"I appreciate that the word 'sanctuary' can mean different things to different people," Garcia said. "What it means for FIRN's clients is a life without fear."

The council could vote on the bill on Feb.

6.

Online

Tuesday's hearing ended after print deadline. To read more, go to howard [countytimes.com](http://www.howardcountytimes.com).